DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 142 890 CG 011 621

AUTHOR Schiavo, R. Steven
TITLE Finding Time for Companionship: Couples with Young Children.
PUB DATE Oct 76
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference on Family Relations (October 19-23, 1976, New York, N.Y.)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Rearing; *Children; *Family Life; Family Problems; *Marital Instability; *Married Students; Research Projects; *Social Relations
IDENTIFIERS *Satisfaction

ABSTRACT

This report discusses data obtained from 123 female respondents living with spouses, averaging 2.6 children under six years of age, in identical apartments in married student housing. The survey, containing some items investigating opportunities for companionship with spouses, focused on time to be together without children and the strategies used to obtain these opportunities. On the average, respondents reported less than two hours a day they could count on to be with their spouses without children. A majority of the respondents indicated that the couples' most frequently used strategy to gain time together was to wait until the children were asleep or out of the apartment. Dissatisfaction with opportunities for companionship was associated with lower time estimates and with having to wait for such opportunities to occur. Other family characteristics did not consistently relate to indices of companionship. (Author)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED142890

Finding Time for Companionship: Couples with Young Children

R. Steven Schiavo

Wellesley College

Summary. 123 female respondents living with spouses, averaging 2.6 children under 6 years of age, in identical apartments in married student housing completed a survey containing some items investigating opportunities for companionship with their spouses. The items focused on time to be together without children and the strategies used to obtain these opportunities. On the average, respondents reported less than two hours a day they could count on to be with their spouses without children. A majority of the respondents indicated that the couples' most frequently used strategy to gain time together was to wait till the children were asleep or out of the apartment. Dissatisfaction with opportunities for companionship was associated with lower time estimates and with having to wait for such opportunities to occur. Other family characteristics did not consistently relate to indices of companionship.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R.S. Schiavo

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

CG011128

Paper presented at annual meeting of National Council on Family Relations, New York City, October, 1976.

Finding Time for Companionship: Couples with Young Children [1]

R. Steven Schiavo

Wellesley College

Companionship within the marital dyad can be considered both in terms of quantity of interaction and in terms of the quality of the experience within the marital dyad. The current paper focuses primarily upon factors related to the quantity of time which the couple has available to them without the presence of children. This narrowly defined component of companionship is important, however, since Rosenblatt (1974) has found that couples in public touch less, talk less, and smile less when accompanied by children than when alone. Consequently, although "children" may in themselves contribute to an affective bond, at times their presence may interfere with the quality of the immediate interpersonal experience. For example, their presence might inhibit thorough discussion of certain issues.

The paper also examines the means or strategies by which the couple gains opportunities to be alone together. Several recent theoretical approaches to interaction emphasize the importance to an individual or a social unit of being able to control or regulate intrusions from others or distance from others. This point is made by Kantor and Lehr (1975) in discussion of family process as well as by Altman (1975) in discussing environmental and social-psychological issues. In this sense, the type and number of strategies a couple has available to gain opportunities to be together away from their children may have important consequences for their relationship.

Subjects and method. Surveys were sent to all women living with their families in three-bedroom apartments in married student housing. Occupation of these apartments is limited to couples with two or more children. The survey return rate was 79.0%. All respondents separated from their spouses (n = 9) were excluded. The analyses below are based on 123 respondents (73.7% of the total population).

Subject characteristics: average age: 27.3 years; average years married: 6.6; number of children ranged from 2 - 5 (average = 2.6) with the age of the oldest averaging 5.6 years; 13.1% of the respondents expected a child within six months. In addition, 19.3% were currently part- or full-time students having completed 14.6 years of education; 30.9% worked outside the home an average of 28.4 hours a week.

Husbands of the respondents were primarily students (90.3% were enrolled part- or full-time), while 72.1% were employed an average of 28.8 hours a week. The majority of the husbands (75.9%) had progressed past the bachelor's degree.

All respondents lived in identical apartments consisting of three bedrooms, eat-in kitchen, living room, hall, and bathroom.

Results

Opportunities for companionship. The respondent was asked to estimate the number of hours each day she could usually "count on" to be with her spouse "as an opportunity to talk with or'just be with' without children." Responses ranged from 0-5 hours with an average of 1.9 hours.

Other answers gave some hints regarding the conditions under which these couples were able to be alone without the presence of children. Several questions asked the usual rising times and bedtimes of each family member. These answers were combined to reveal that only 23.1% of the couples had any time (i.e., at least one-half hour or more) alone in the morning before any child awoke. On the other hand, in the evening 75.4% had at least two hours while all children were in bed and both spouses were awake. However, 7.6% of the couples had no time at all alone without children awake in the evening.

The women were also asked to indicate from a list of seven typical household chores which ones, if any, could be counted upon to serve as "an opportunity to talk with, spend time with, or just be with" their respective spouses (without children). Only 21.3% of the sample reported one or more chores provided an opportunity for companionship. The most frequently chosen chores were: clean-up

after meals (7.3%), shopping (7.3%), and meal preparation (3.3%). Although sharing household chores did not provide a frequent means of attaining opportunities for companionship, the more chores shared with the spouse the more hours a day the respondent estimated the couple had together ($r = 0.22$, $df = 100$, $p < .05$).

Evaluation of opportunities to be with spouse. Respondents were asked to rate how they felt about their opportunities to be with their spouses: 66.4% reported that they were dissatisfied to some degree with the number and the way in which they obtained these opportunities to be together as a couple. Respondents evaluated these opportunities more positively the more hours a day they spent with their spouses ($r = .30$, $df = 113$, $p < .01$). In addition, as evaluation increased, respondents were less likely to report that the physical features of their apartments (i.e., layout or size) hindered their marital relationship ($r = -.26$, $df = 117$, $p < .01$). Evaluation of these opportunities was unrelated to other factors associated with the family; number of children; age of oldest child; number of hours husband was employed; and the wife's employment status.

An interesting factor did relate to the respondents' evaluation of these opportunities. In other items respondents reported how they and their spouses obtained time to be alone as individuals. Although the respondents' evaluation of their opportunities to be with their spouses was unrelated to the privacy strategies they used as individuals themselves, the respondents were less satisfied with these couple-opportunities if they reported that their husbands left the apartment as one means of his achieving time alone ($t = 2.37$, $p < .05$, $df = 113$). None of the husband's other strategies nor his total number of privacy strategies were related to the wife's evaluation of their opportunities together as a couple.

Strategies used by the couple to be together. On one item the respondent indicated which ones, if any, of a list of eight were strategies that she and her spouse usually used if they "wanted an opportunity to be together, to discuss things, etc." The respondents also indicated which single strategy they used most frequently.

The strategies listed here in order of the respondents who reported their use were: wait till the children are asleep or busy (84.4%); ask the children to leave you alone (51.6%); go to a room away from the children (41.0%); leave the apartment (37.7%); it's no problem even with the children around (21.3%); do a task together (5.7%); and work together on a project (5.7%). The number of strategies endorsed ranged from 1-5, with an average of 2.5.

The total number of strategies used was unrelated both to subjective evaluation of the couple's opportunities and to the number of hours estimated to be together without children. However, women who worked endorsed fewer total strategies than women without such extra familial demands. ($\bar{X}$ working = 2.3, $\bar{X}$ not = 2.6, t = 1.99, df = 120, $p < .05$). Individual strategies were also unrelated to aspects of companionship.

The principal method to get opportunities for companionship which was used by most couples (63.1%) was to "wait till children are asleep or busy." Other methods reported to be used primarily were: go to a room (11.5% of the couples); ask the children to go away (9.8%); and leave the apartment (9.0%). Additional analyses revealed that couples who primarily waited for companionship evaluated these opportunities less positively than those who relied more frequently on other strategies (r = 0.20, $p < .05$, df = 118). In addition, couples who primarily waited were less likely than others to report that they could go to a room to be away from the children (34.2 vs. 53.3%, X^2 = 4.50, $p < .05$, df = 1), and were less likely to report that being together as a couple was not a problem with the children around (14.3 vs. 33.3%; X^2 = 6.14, $p < .001$, df = 1). It is interesting to note, however, that couples with 4 or 5 children were least likely to report that they used "waiting" as their most frequent strategy (X^2 = 6.78, $p < .05$, df = 2). Number of children was unrelated to endorsement of other strategies.

Husband - wife roles within the family. Six items from the survey were available to examine the degree to which the couples' relationships were role-stereotyped. These items were selected as indicating less stereotyped relationships since they reflected either the wife's personal commitments extending beyond the family or the husband's involvement within the home.

None of the aspects of companionship were related to whether the respondent expressed any occupational goals (36.6% had such goals). In addition, as indicated above, the wife's current employment status (30.9% worked) was related only to the number of strategies in that couples in which the wife was employed used fewer strategies to be together.

Two other items represented the husband's involvement with household tasks: the degree to which the husband shared in decorating the apartment and the number of household chores which could be counted upon to provide an opportunity for companionship. Although responses to these two items were related ($r = 0.24$, $df = 104$, $p < .05$), and/was related to number of hours a day the couple spent together ($r = 0.22$, $df = 102$, $p < .05$), neither item correlated significantly with other aspects of companionship or to the couple's strategies for getting time together.

sharing of household chores

Respondents were also asked who usually granted children permission to use or occupy special objects, belongings, or places that the wife or husband usually reserved for her/his own individual use. Couples in which this permission - granting function was shared (as opposed to ones in which it was person-fixed) also reported using more strategies to achieve opportunities together as a couple. ($r = 0.18$, $df = 113$, $p < .05$). Among the particular strategies available, these couples were more likely to report being able to go to a room away from the children (60.0 vs. 29.2%, $X^2 = 10.88$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$).

In addition, on an item asking the respondents how they attained opportunities for personal privacy, one alternative was to ask the husband to care for the

children. Women who reported using this method for attaining individual privacy also reported more strategies in total used by the couple to be together ($r = 0.20$, $p < .05$, $df = 118$). These couples were more likely to leave the apartment to be together (49.1 vs. 29.9%, $df = 1$, $p < .05$) and were less likely to report that companionship was not a problem with the children around (13.2 vs. 28.4%, $X^2 = 4.00$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$). These respondents whose spouses frequently could be counted upon to care for the children were also less likely to indicate that the apartment's physical features interfered with the marital relationship ($r = 0.22$, $df = 116$, $p < .05$). Couples in which the wife could use this strategy for herself tended also to be ones in which the permission - granting norms were shared. ($X^2 = 3.03$, $df = 1$, $p = .07$). However, neither of these indices were related to the other aspects of companionship or to other aspects of the family - e.g., number of children, wife's employment status.

Discussion

In summary, these analyses indicate that couples with young children estimate having about two hours a day together alone, but most have few mechanisms to attain actively these opportunities for companionship within the daily routine. What time is available tends to occur after children are asleep and, in some families, in association with performing household tasks. Reported dissatisfaction with these opportunities is associated not only with lower estimates of time alone together, but also in reports that the primary mode of attaining these opportunities is to wait for them to occur. These empirical relationships may reflect the couples' experiences of being unable to control or regulate children's intrusions or interference as was indicated by the fact that couples who most frequently had to wait for these opportunities also reported that it was difficult to be together when the children were around. The importance of this lack of control is related to issues discussed by Altman (1975) and by Kantor and Lehr (1975).

There are several related questions and issues raised by these findings. One such issue is the extent to which two hours a day is a sufficient quantity for the couple to share. In the population surveyed, the majority reported having fewer opportunities than desired, which implies at least some normative consensus regarding expectations for the amount of time available to be together. Clearly, these expectations were not being met. The analyses did not reveal any correlates which might facilitate having time to spend together alone. Indeed, it is interesting that the estimated quantity of time was independent of whether the spouses had work or school commitments outside the home. Additional study is needed to reveal other family parameters which might relate to the amount of time couples have without the presence of children.

Another issue relates to the quality of the time spent together. The data suggest that these opportunities are available at the day's end and, for some, in doing household chores. It is highly possible that these contexts for being together, if they are the primary ones, inhibit the quality of the experience since the spouses might not be able to engage as fully as they might wish in relationship-oriented activities. In this light it might also be important to investigate whether couples differentially define opportunities to "be with" each other. For some these opportunities could include being engaged in independent activities in a quiet house; for others, sitting side by side watching television; and yet others might only feel they are "with" each other while engaged in intimate discussion. Couples with different definitions of companionship might well evaluate and estimate differently these opportunities.

The analyses indicated that there was not a single, particular strategy which was successful in relation to estimates of time together or to the subjective evaluation of these opportunities. Similarly, the sheer number of strategies used also did not relate to these outcomes. It is possible that the subjective aspects of companionship (evaluation, estimated hours together) and the

behavioral methods adopted to attain these opportunities may be related in a more complex way than was possible to determine in this survey. It seems likely that a particular means used to attain such opportunities might be more adaptive or functional than others; however, the relationship may be influenced by family or marital variables not considered in this study.

One factor which did relate to the subjective evaluation of companionship opportunities was whether couples primarily waited for children to leave them alone or used actively a means of obtaining time to be together. It seems important in this regard to investigate possible factors which might distinguish between couples reporting these modes. One distinguishing feature may be that these couples differ in their ability to set limits with their children. Another might be that they differ in the relative priority placed upon the marital relationship as contrasted with parent-child interaction or the family as a group. These factors would relate to the couple's effectiveness or willingness in controlling interference from children.

The results were inconclusive regarding the influence of the couples' role-relationships on companionship. For example, none of the aspects of companionship were consistently related to each of the sex-role indices nor were the indices themselves consistently interrelated. Since the survey's original purpose was not to examine the impact of sex-roles upon companionship, the pattern of results raise additional issues which would be of interest to pursue in research focusing more explicitly upon such variables. For example, the aspect of companionship which was related to more of the sex-role indices was the total number of strategies frequently used as a means for obtaining time alone together. These empirical relationships suggest that the two measures reflect the couple's flexibility and/or norms regarding the acceptability of a variety of techniques to obtain time together. Another interesting aspect of these role indices is that those indicating less sex-typed behaviors (e.g.,

wife's employment, husband's decorating the home) were less associated with indices of companionship than were those suggesting a particular kind of relationship involving cooperation and mutuality. These latter indices included sharing time in the context of household chores, sharing authority, and sharing child care for the wife's benefit. The question arises regarding the extent to which these particular relationship characteristics can be independent of relationships characterized by sex-typed behaviors. In addition, it is important to determine whether these indices reflect again a higher priority given to the marital relationship or simply a more positive interpersonal relationship between the spouses.

This survey focused upon factors other than the affective marital relationship which might hinder or facilitate opportunities for the marital couple to be together. However, the results did not firmly establish what family or marital characteristics related to various aspects of companionship opportunities. It is possible that the homogeneity of the sample (e.g., amount of extra-familial demands upon the spouses, income level, age of children) might mask the operation of particular variables which would be evident upon considering more varied family characteristics. The prospective value of this study seems basically to lie in developing norms for companionship opportunities in families with young children and for generating hypotheses.

References

Altman, I. The environment and social behavior: Privacy, personal space, territory, crowding. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1975.

Kantor, D., & Lehr, W. Inside the family: Toward a theory of family process. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975.

Rosenblatt, P.C., Behavior in public places: Comparison of couples accompanied and unaccompanied by children. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 1974, 36, 750-755.

Footnote

1. This research was supported by NIMH Postdoctoral Fellowship 1 F22 MH00535-01 which the author held while on leave at the University of Utah during 1974-75. I would like to express my appreciation to those colleagues and friends who contributed to a year of intellectual and scholarly growth. First of all, to James F. Alexander, who sponsored my scholarly introduction into family life, and to Irwin Altman, who interested me in privacy. Cole Barton and Robin Malouf also provided stimulation and companionship. Finally, thanks to those others who also aided in the transition for a transplanted Easterner: Sue Grant (who, in addition, typed the survey), Jolynn Skinner, and Wendy Smith.